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ABSTRACT

In response to the interest in the potential good that may result from the development and implementation of parent education programs, the Dooly County (Georgia) school district organized several parent education efforts beginning in 1973-74. During the 1976-77 school year, the reading coordinator decided to conduct a parent education program among the parents of first grade children and to utilize a control group in an attempt to determine if parent education was making a difference. The parents of approximately 50 first grade children were asked to participate in a series of ten workshops that were each two hours in length. In addition parents were asked to work with their children for a minimum of 10 minutes per day for at least 30 weeks. Meetings were videotaped and any parent missing a meeting was asked to make it up by viewing the videotapes. Thirty-five parents completed the project. The data indicated that the treatment used made no difference in the first grade reading achievement of the children involved. Other studies suggest, however, that a longer period of time for the treatment may have resulted in greater improvement of student achievement. (HOD)

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PARENT EDUCATION: DOES IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

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PARENT EDUCATION: DOES IT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

The road to reading maturity contains a multitude of obstacles for some children. These impediments to progress may be so minor in nature that they cause only a momentary delay in reading growth or they may be of such magnitude that they suppress reading development permanently for some children. Since 1972 the Dooly County School System of Vienna, Georgia has implemented a variety of instructional programs for the purpose of insuring that children are confronted with fewer obstacles to success in reading. One component of this effort involved a structured parent education program during the 1976-1977 school year.

Benjamin Bloom (1971) has identified three variables which can serve to restrict or to facilitate the learning of a particular task. For each learning task there are some prerequisite learnings for the student who is to attain mastery of the operation. These prerequisite learnings have been labeled "entry behaviors" and represent the first variable. Bloom believes it is impossible for a learner to achieve mastery on a learning task if he does not possess the essential entry behaviors for it. "Entry behavior" may account for up to 50 percent of the variation which exists in school achievement, according to Bloom.

The second variable is referred to as "affective entry characteristics." This represents a compound of interests and attitudes toward the subject matter of the learning task,

attitudes toward the school and schooling, as well as more deep-seated self-concepts and personality characteristics. Bloom perceives this factor as representing up to 25 percent of children's variation in school achievement.

"Quality of instruction" is seen as the third variable which may constitute up to 25 percent of the variation among school achievement. Whether or not these three variables produce the estimated percentage of variation is of little consequence, but it is important to recognize that individually or collectively they do account for much of the variation in the school achievement of children.

The instructional program which was devised for parents was intended to help influence to some degree two of the three sources of variation identified by Bloom. It was assumed that parents can and do provide experiences for their children which contribute to the "entry behaviors" and the "affective entry characteristics" necessary for success in reading.

The Status of Parent Education

The literature is replete with statements and contentions which espouse the potential good to be derived from well organized programs of parent education based on sound principles of human development. To provide an exhaustive review in which every writer who had penned an opinion of the topic is recognized would be a Herculean task as witnessed by the popular treatment of parent education in a wide variety of current publications. The task

is not so formidable, though, when a survey is made of programs that attempted to measure the effects of parent education on the reading achievement of children. Such studies are considerably smaller in number and remarkably more inconclusive than those articles based only on personal opinion or conjecture.

In 1975 the National Institute of Education reported the findings of 10 panels which made up the NIE Conference on Studies in Reading. A primary purpose of the conference was to set priorities and make recommendations for potential research topics. Panel nine under the leadership of Ramirez (1975) identified 26 areas in which research is needed in relation to reading strategies for different cultural and linguistic groups. All areas were defined as vitally important and rated as high, higher, and highest in terms of priority. Among the highest priority areas were the following recommendations:

> Identification of the effects, particularly on the learning of reading and communication skills of the attitudes and beliefs of the parents as to what the nature of their involvement should be.
>
> Investigation of the effects of programs which have made use of parents, peers, siblings, tutors, or any other community resource other than regular teachers for the teaching of reading.

In a study which was designed to identify significant contributions in language development, learning to read, and the reading process, MacGinitie (1976) identified the amount and variety of stimulation in the home, parental patterns of reinforcement including feedback, and other characteristics of parents as areas in which precise answers are mostly unknown and as areas in which research is needed.

The Region IV Demonstration Effort in Parent Education for Early Childhood was instituted in 1975 in the southeastern states which make up Region IV of the United States Office of Education. The effort was sponsored jointly by the Office of Education and the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges. The entire project represented an attempt to answer two questions:

1. Can educators and other professionals help parents become better teachers?

2. How can the school become an integral part of the parent teaching/learning process? (Parent education demonstration project, a study for region IV, 1975)

In addition to questions on the effectiveness of parent education programs there are also important questions which have to do with the desirability of such programs both from the standpoint of educators and parents. Gallup (1976) in his poll of the public's attitudes toward the public school asked the following question:

> As a regular part of the public school educational system it has been suggested that courses be offered at convenient times to parents in order to help them help their children in school. Do you think this is a good idea or a poor idea?

Of the public school parents who responded, 78 percent said they thought it was a good idea and 52 percent of those who approved said they would be willing to pay additional taxes to support such a program. Those parents in the youngest age group, from 18 to 29 years old, overwhelmingly supported the idea and by a greater margin than the older age groups. The younger group represented the age group most likely to have children in the primary grades.

Parents apparently feel a need for parent education programs. Educational leaders such as Bell (1975), former United States Education Commissioner, and Nix (1976), former Georgia State School Superintendent, have expressed an interest in the potential good which may result from the development and implementation of parent education programs.

Procedures for Parent Education in Dooly County

Dooly County is a rural county which according to the 1970 U. S. Census had a population of 10,404 persons (Peng and Arias, 1973). The public schools had a total of 2,186 enrollment during the 1976-77 school year. In addition, there are three preschool centers within the district which are operated by the Board of Education. The educational attainment levels in Dooly County fall below state averages. The average number of school years completed is 8.4 for males and 9.4 for females. These figures indicate that many children probably come from homes in which the educational background of the family members is not likely to provide a large number of experiences conducive to optimal educational growth.

Organized parent education efforts were first attempted in the district in 1973-1974. This involved sessions with parents whose children attended the preschool. Videotapes were used to show parents various components of the program. This proved to be a highly effective means of initially motivating

parents to attend meetings. Written notices encouraged parents to "come see your children on television." After the video tapes were shown the Reading Coordinator and the preschool teachers worked with parents and stressed the objectives and the importance of the preschool experiences. Meetings were held four times a year at each of three preschool centers and on most occasions the attendance far exceeded the expectations.

During the 1975-1976 school year a Title III 306 ESEA parent education project was begun in Dooly County and the parents of 95 four-and five-year old children took part. A parent outreach center was established from which parents could check out instructional materials and equipment for use with their children. A Parent Coordinator worked with parents in large groups, small groups, and individually. Those parents who attended at least 70 percent of the large group meetings were given a participation certificate by the Continuing Education Center at Georgia Southwestern College.

At this point it was the opinion of school officials in the district that parent education efforts had been highly successful as evidenced by the participation and comments of parents, but no objective data were available to reject or confirm any role which parent education might have had in improving student achievement. The Reading Coordinator decided to conduct a parent education program among the parents of first grade children during the 1976-1977 school year and to utilize a control group in an attempt to determine if parent education was making a difference.

The parents of approximately 50 first grade children were asked to participate in a series of ten workshops which were each two hours in length. In addition each parent was asked to work with his/her child for a minimum of 10 minutes per day for a least 30 weeks. Meetings were video taped and any parent who missed a meeting was asked to make it up by viewing the video tapes. Principals and teachers were used to inform parents about the project.

The parents of 45 children pledged to participate and complete the program requirements. Thirty five parents or 78 percent of those who made commitments completed them. From those 10 parents who did not fulfill their commitments, three began the program and had to drop out because of illness in the family. One family moved, and four parents attended two meetings and did not return despite continued efforts to get them to meetings. Two parents made repeated promises of their intention to take part, but they did not attend a single meeting. The sampling procedure did not result in a random sample, but in a study of this type, this was the only sample possible since the entire project was based on a willingness to participate voluntarily.

For the control group, 35 children were selected to correspond with the 35 members of the experimental group whose parents completed the program. A random sampling procedure was used to select the control group.

A portion of each workshop consisted of a lecture type activity, but a part of each meeting also consisted of a discussion period and a question and answer time. For most sessions parents were given a time in which they could become actively involved in either making or using instructional materials. Time was also given before and after most sessions and during the breaks for parents to interact with and question the principals, teachers, or Reading Coordinator on any matter relative to their child's reading which was of concern to the parent.

Dr. Dickson Carroll, an Associate Professor of Reading and Early Childhood Education at Georgia Southwestern College, was used as a program consultant for seven of the 10 meetings. Dr. James Dinnan, a Professor of Reading at the University of Georgia, was used as a program consultant for the second meeting.

The Reading Coordinator developed an outline for the curriculum areas to be covered and scheduled and participated in all meetings. A teacher aide served as parent contactor and worked one-half time on the project throughout the school year. It was her responsibility to contact each parent before each meeting and to provide transportation for the parent if needed. A station wagon owned by the Board of Education was used at each meeting for this purpose.

The parent contactor also served as a librarian to check out and in a large supply of books which parents used with their children. The workshops were finished in March 1977.

From this time until June 1977 the parent contactor attempted to contact each parent on a weekly basis to help with problems which might have arisen and to determine if all parents were adhering to their commitments. In addition, during the time the meetings were being conducted, she made contacts with principals and teachers to arrange facilities, and she arranged to have refreshments for the parents.

The home economics teacher at Vienna High School provided high school students who served as baby sitters during each of the sessions. This service enabled some parents to attend who would not have been able to participate otherwise. On several occasions, refreshments were prepared by the high school home economics students.

The following is a summary of each parent workshop.

Number 1. The scope and content of the program was explained at this orientation meeting. Repeated emphasis was given at this meeting and at subsequent meetings that parents were not being asked to teach their children but rather they were asked to provide some home experiences which would reinforce and support the instructional reading program of the school. Parents were asked to read several simple sentences which made use of an alphabet devised by McKee (1966). This was designed as a learning experience to help parents relate to the problems which a child may encounter as he begins to learn to read.

Number 2. Dr. Dinnan made this presentation and stressed the idea that children should understand the relationship between words with reference to space, time, and amount. It was stressed that it is not sufficient or desirable to memorize word lists but it is essential to learn relationships. Suggestions were given for ways in which word sets may be taught in the home by using ordinary objects.

Number 3. The Dooly County Schools use the Harper & Row Reading Basics Plus as a basal series. At this meeting each parent was given a tutorial kit for Harper & Row Tutorial Program (Ellson, Harris, and Moran, 1973). This kit is intended for use by people with no professional experience and directions explicitly detail what is to be done and how to do it. Parents were carefully taught how to use the kit. This was accomplished through group work and individual conferences.

Number 4. Concepts introduced at session three were reinforced and individual conferences were held with each parent.

Number 5. Record keeping procedures for the tutorial kit were explained and instruction was given on reading to children. Parents were asked to read to their children from various library books that were available in the Parent Outreach Center.

Number 6. Parents reported their experiences with the

tutorial program and shared their feelings about reading to their children. Part of the session was devoted to building positive parent-child relationships in the family. Selected items from the Porter Parental Acceptance Scale (Porter 1969) were used to stimulate discussion on the needs of children, the needs of parents, and the healthy interaction of family members.

Number 7. A lesson was taught from Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (Dinkmeyer and McKay, 1976). This was lesson three in a series of nine and was entitled, "Encouragement: Building Your Child's Confidence and Feeling of Worth."

Number 8. Parents were given an opportunity to compare books from several basal reading series which dated back to the 1930's with those contained in a modern basal series. Each parent held a conference with the teacher of his/her child. Conferences were used to discuss the progress of each parent's first grade child. Teachers used this meeting to schedule a time for each parent to visit her classroom and observe a directed reading lesson.

Number 9. Parents were taught to reinforce reading skills by playing word games with their children. Emphasis was given to those games which could best be played on a one to one basis.

Number 10. Parents visited the first grade classroom of their child and observed a directed reading lesson.

Eight first grade teachers were involved and the visits were scheduled at various times. The principals provided a teacher aide to conduct classes while each teacher talked with each parent.

Results of the Study

The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test was used in conjunction with the Dale Avenue Project (Gavzy, 1974) in Dooly County and pretest scores from September 1976 were gathered to help determine if a significant difference in IQ existed between the means of the experimental and the control groups at the beginning of the school year. There was no significant difference. The Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills which is published by the California Test Bureau of McGraw-Hill was used as one means of measuring student growth in reading. Level A served as a pretest and level B as the posttest. There was no significant difference between the means of the experimental group and the control group at either the beginning or the end of the study. There was a significant difference between the children who were in the first grade in 1975-1976 and those who were in the first grade in 1976-1977. The difference was in favor of the students who were in the first grade during the 1976-1977 school year.

The available data support the conclusion that the treatment used in the study made no difference in the first

grade reading achievement of the children involved. However, several points need to be explored. Smith (1975) devoted a significant portion of his book to the proposition that severe restrictions exist within which the basic propensity for learning must operate. Although the brain of a child or adult may be infinite in its potentiality, there are bounds to how much it can achieve on any particular occasion because of a bottleneck caused by the processing limitations imposed by short-term memory. The graduate school professor who constantly overloads his students with a plethora of concepts which the students have neither the background nor the time to assimilate is guilty of such a boundary violation. So too is the kindergarten teacher guilty of a boundary violation when she overshoots the child's ability to grasp ideas by moving at a pace for which the child is unprepared to proceed. It is entirely possible that the pace and content of the parent education program was not in tune with the learning boundaries of the parents.

Various writers, including Heilman (1972), Smith (1971), and Zintz (1975), have acknowledged reading as a complex developmental process. As an extension of this statement, Heilman added that learning to read is a long-term process extending over a period of years. In retrospect, it must be concluded that the actual time during which parents worked

with their children in this study was much shorter than the period of time encompassed by the pretest-posttest evaluation. Some of the parents who completed the program did not begin to take part until the middle of January 1977. This delay resulted because it was difficult to schedule meetings at a time which was convenient for all parents.

The posttests were given in the middle of May 1977; Thus, some parents in the study could not have worked with their children for more than four months. Many of the parents made up meetings via means of the video taped sessions. Each meeting made up in this way meant that the involved parent would not have as many days to work with his/her child as did the parents who attended the original meeting.

A distinct possibility looms that a longer period of time for the treatment may have resulted in greater improvement of student achievement. The findings of Heisler and Crowley (1969) reinforce this idea. In their study, no significant results were available after two years of concerted efforts in working with the parents of first and second grade children. It was only after three full years of the program's existence that positive results in the form of improved student reading scores were obtained.

The time allocation suggested for parent-child interactions and for the instructional meetings for parents was based on two considerations. The first dealt with the amount of time local educators could devote to the program and with the amount of time parents would likely give. The second consideration came from

writers, such as Breiling (1976), who suggested a 10 minute per day child-parent work schedule. It appears that a close examination needs to be made of the actual time needed for parents to work with their children and to the amount of time parents are willing to devote to this activity.

Many of the workshop activities such as the use of the Porter Parental Acceptance Scale (Porter, 1969) were intended to help change parental outlooks. It is possible that the activities within this category represent the more important attempts to bring about change which will result in an ultimate improvement in the reading of children. Unfortunately, no evaluation instruments were used to measure any changes which might have occurred among parents in attending, awareness, commitment, acceptance, or other areas of the affective domain (Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia, 1964). Neither was it possible to measure the impact of those activities which were included to help parents better understand the process and the procedures involved in learning to reading.

Parent education studies which attempted to influence the reading achievement of first grade children appear to be limited in number. Freshour (1970), MacLaren (1965), Rosenquist (1973), Crossett (1973), and Heisler and Crowley (1969) represent studies which can be classified in this category. MacLaren (1965), who worked with all white parents, achieved a significant increase in reading among first grade children. Rosenquist (1973) also achieved a significant reading

improvement among subjects drawn from a high socioeconomic area. Heisler and Crowley (1969) achieved significant reading gains but only after a period of three years.

This investigation was a one year study involving a large portion of parents from a low socioeconomic level. It appears that no other such study has been reported in which a significant difference in reading achievement was found between the means of the experimental group and the control group.

In view of the increased interest in parent education among educators the following recommendations for further research are made:

1. Research should be conducted in which attempts are made to measure changes in parents as well as changes in children.
2. A study similar to this one but encompassing a longer period of time should be undertaken. The time period should be at least three years.
3. Further study is suggested to determine how educators can best utilize their limited resources in working with parents.
4. A study should be undertaken to determine whether the costs in terms of time and effort make such programs with the parents of school age children worthwhile.
5. An intensive study needs to be made to determine those aspects of a parent program most likely to yield improved student achievement in reading and better school-community relations.

6. It would also be valuable to determine if a one year study involving a greater degree of school-parent interaction would be more productive than was this study.
7. A study similar to this one should be conducted with various socioeconomic groups, both in a rural and in an urban setting.
8. A study should be made to investigate the difference in effectiveness between live parent education presentations and those presentations made via video tape.

In terms of observational evaluations which are not supported by statistical significance it is believed that parent education in Dooly County did serve to improve education in the system. An intensified degree of communication and understanding was noted among parents, children, and educators. Teachers discovered that parents were concerned about the welfare of their children. Parents discovered they had something to offer in the reading development of their children and the children found a new source of pride when they realized their parents were concerned enough to become involved in parent education. It was also observed that the Dooly County parent education program was one of two parent education programs in the state of Georgia which were listed in the 1978 edition of Exemplary Programs for the Governor's Task Force on Education Published by the Georgia State Department of Education.

The first grade children of 1976-1977 are now completing their third year of school. Recently an elementary principal in Dooly County remarked that 10 of his third graders are achieving higher in reading than any third graders who have ever been in that school. A quick survey of the 10 names revealed that eight of these children were students whose parents had taken part in the parent education program two years ago. Hopefully, that counts for something.

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